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SUBJECT: DEPARTING UNIFICATION MINISTER URGES FLEXIBILITY
ON DPRK

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a meeting with the Ambassador on November 16, Unification Minister Lee Jong-seok reconfirmed that the ROKG would support the UN resolution on DPRK human rights. Noting his awareness of USG disappointment with the ROKG's November 13 announcement on PSI, Lee told the Ambassador that Seoul would increase its range of PSI participation. More importantly, he asserted, the ROKG had the determination to deter WMD proliferation to or from the DPRK. USG flexibility was now important to make progress at the Six Party Talks, the focus of which should be denuclearization (rather than illicit activities or human rights). Lee explained that ROKG policy toward North Korea derived from a desire for stability and not from any special affinity for the DPRK. The Ambassador emphasized that the USG welcomed greater ROKG participation in PSI and suggested that increased ROKG inspections of DPRK ships and cargo would be a positive signal of ROKG vigilance. The Ambassador reinforced the point that early, concrete DPRK steps toward denuclearization were the key to successful Six Party Talks. He also encouraged the ROK to be more resolute in the face of DPRK rhetoric. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) In a farewell call on Unification Minister Lee Jong-seok, who is expected to leave office November 22, the Ambassador expressed appreciation for their working relationship and inquired whether, in addition to steps announced on November 13 in accordance with UNSCR 1718, there were any more fundamental changes in ROKG strategy toward the DPRK after the North Korean nuclear test.

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DPRK HUMAN RIGHTS

¶3. (C) Pointing to one change, Unification Minister Lee confirmed that the ROKG had decided to vote for the UN resolution on North Korean human rights even though the vote might complicate inter-Korean relations. Lee stressed that the ROKG decision was in part in response to the clear USG interest on the issue. The Ambassador remarked that this was welcome news. Moreover, it was the right thing to do, both in terms of principle and to the extent that it would help Washington's perception of ROKG actions.

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PSI AND INSPECTION ISSUES

14. (C) Lee reaffirmed that the ROKG would increase its range of participation in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). He knew that the USG sought more formal and full ROKG participation and was disappointed in Seoul's November 13 announcement, which stopped short of an endorsement of the Statement of Interdiction Principles. However, the ROKG needed to manage a unique situation that included the ever-present North-South military confrontation. Lee sought to assure the Ambassador that the ROKG possessed the determination to deter proliferation from or to the DPRK. The ROKG, he noted, already had enough regulations and procedures in place to stop potential proliferation.

15. (C) The Ambassador reiterated that the USG still hoped to discuss PSI further with South Korean counterparts. Despite understandable political realities on the Peninsula, the ROKG could become a formal PSI participant while continuing to limit its actual activities in line with its special circumstances. It would be a positive signal if the ROKG conducted a test inspection of a DPRK vessel in accordance with the North-South Maritime Agreement. It appeared to some that there was a lack of intensive inspections of cargo going to and from North Korea via the inter-Korean transportation corridors, perhaps due in part to limited inspection personnel. It would be a good message if the ROKG conducted more frequent inspections to demonstrate its heightened vigilance.

16. (C) Lee responded that the ROKG would intensify inspections of North Korean ships if necessary. However, there was no possibility that DPRK ships could transit ROKG

waters transferring WMD materials to a third country. Lee claimed that DPRK ships made port calls in the ROK and entered ROK territorial waters to deliver goods between the two Koreas, such as humanitarian aid. Similarly, goods being sent overland to North Korea were being used by ROK companies in the Kaesong Industrial Complex or the Kumgang tourism project. The ROK was already making new efforts for customs inspections of goods going to the DPRK. For example, the ROK strictly controlled the export of important items with serial numbers. Lee stressed that the ROKG would do what it had to do to prevent proliferation.

17. (C) The Ambassador indicated that questions might remain about North Korean goods entering South Korea. ROK inspections would reassure people that Seoul was staying vigilant in light of the new situation on the Peninsula, regardless if the North was trying to ship WMD items or counterfeit cigarettes.

18. (C) Lee replied that the ROKG would intensify its inspections as much as possible to eliminate even the slightest concern that the USG might have.

LEE: USG THE KEY TO SIX PARTY TALKS . . .

19. (C) Asked about the North's decision to return to the Six Party Talks, Lee opined that the prospects for successful talks in the short run were not that bright. The DPRK would assert a tougher position now that it had conducted a nuclear test and would demonstrate a stronger will to retain its nuclear capabilities. The most important factor, Lee continued, was the attitude of the United States. If the United States offered enough incentives, it was still possible that the DPRK would abandon its nuclear programs. On the other hand, if the USG approached the talks from a moral point of view, with the emphasis on good versus evil, then it was possible that the North would pursue nuclear weapons permanently.

110. (C) Lee claimed that some experts in the United States had concluded that the DPRK had shown a consistent intention to possess nuclear weapons, while others argued that the USG

since 2003 had not offered enough to induce North Korea to abandon its nuclear programs. Some felt that the USG had allowed the current situation to happen, he said. If the international community now failed to demonstrate flexibility in return for DPRK promises, we might miss the opportunity to secure a strategic agreement and find ourselves in a situation where we would eventually be unable to induce North Korea to abandon its nuclear programs.

¶11. (C) The Ambassador countered that, while the USG viewed the situation as urgent, the international community needed more than North Korean promises in the wake of the nuclear test. The North signed the September 2005 Joint Statement; the DPRK must carry out its pledges to dismantle its nuclear programs. The international community indeed would respond if the North actually fulfilled its obligations. It was insufficient to ask whether the USG had offered enough concessions because Washington had made it clear throughout the Six Party Talks process that we would meet our commitments. It would be more effective if the countries pursued a team effort. We needed a coordinated response to the North Korean challenge.

¶12. (C) The Ambassador observed that one reason the DPRK dropped its preconditions for a resumption in Six Party Talks was UNSCR 1718. The DPRK found itself up against the international community, not just the United States. Moreover, China not only supported UNSCR 1718 and UNSCR 1695 but was also increasing efforts to pressure the North. We should avoid the fallacious U.S.-versus-DPRK argument and find ways to convince the North that it could not continue to avoid its commitments without paying any costs.

¶13. (C) Lee agreed and said the ROKG was taking measures beyond the scope of UNSCR 1718, which was an international obligation. In his view, however, the North returned to the Six Party talks not because of UNSCR 1718 but because it had conducted a nuclear test and could argue from a position of strength. An additional factor was that the USG had agreed to discuss the resolution of the Banco Delta Asia (BDA) issue within the framework of the Six Party Talks. Lee expressed his own view that, had the USG and DPRK reached this agreement one month earlier than the Beijing meeting of October 31, the North might have returned to the talks without having conducted a nuclear test.

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... FOCUS SHOULD BE THE NUCLEAR PROGRAMS . . .

¶14. (C) Lee said that when the Six Party Talks resumed, we should reject the North Korean insistence that it be considered a nuclear power. Lee expressed the concern that doing otherwise and accepting North Korea as a nuclear state might incite hard-liners to call for even stronger measures against the DPRK, which would derail the talks. The focus should be on encouraging the North to take concrete actions toward denuclearization. This would require Seoul, Washington and Beijing to have bold and flexible measures to offer North Korea. When a roadmap for DPRK nuclear dismantlement was developed, then we could work on a roadmap for international incentives for North Korea. If the USG really saw a nuclear DPRK as a catastrophe and sought peace and stability in the region, then the USG must make every effort to achieve dismantlement, leaving aside issues such as human rights and illicit activities for the time being, Lee argued.

¶15. (C) The Ambassador stated that the DPRK needed to take concrete steps to show it was actually moving toward nuclear dismantlement. Other countries could then commit to equally bold steps. The concern, however, was that the North would ask for our bold steps in return for just declaratory promises, such as a missile launch moratorium or a nuclear test freeze, which would be insufficient, words only. We should set a high standard for DPRK actions, as well as for our responses. BDA, for example, would not prove an easy issue to resolve, and the North would need to demonstrate

that it was getting out of this type of illegal behavior. While human rights and other issues might be more fully addressed at a different stage, perhaps in the process of normalization talks, the point was that North Korea needed to take early steps to meet its obligations to denuclearize.

. . . NORTH-SOUTH RELATIONS HAVE STALLED

¶16. (C) The Ambassador stated that the DPRK had broken promises to the international community, including South Korea. The North, for example, had prevented progress on the inter-Korean railways, and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il had not delivered on his 2000 pledge to pay a return visit to South Korea for a summit. Confidence-building was a two-way street, and he asked if there were any recent positive gestures from North Korea on inter-Korean relations.

¶17. (C) Lee answered that the North indeed had recently given signs that it would consider, for example, another round of family reunions. In his view, however, it was not proper to advance inter-Korean relations at this time. Seoul first wanted to see some progress in Six Party Talks. Lee opined that some in the USG might have the misperception that South Koreans actually trusted the North Korean leadership. He explained that his doctoral thesis had shown the failure of the North Korean policy of Juche and the undemocratic nature of the North Korean dictatorship. He and his South Korean colleagues had experienced a war with North Korea and were daily living with a military confrontation. A single negative word from South Korea might provoke North Korea into starting a shooting war. A single negative word from North Korea might shake South Korean financial markets. Therefore, the ROKG had to be careful in its policy toward North Korea. Lee joked that among the Six Party member countries, he was the only minister who offered his resignation because of the DPRK nuclear test, so how could one say that he had much trust in Kim Jong-il. Lee concluded by saying that sometimes one needed to talk to the hostage-takers. Seoul wanted to build peace on the Peninsula and resolve confrontation with Pyongyang.

¶18. (C) The Ambassador said that Seoul and Washington should not let North Korean bullying tactics have too much influence

over our policies. South Korea was stronger than North Korea, and not only in military terms. South Korea had a strong democracy and economic institutions and the South Korean people had a strong character, which was the real threat to North Korea. The South had succeeded where the North had failed. The North was not suicidal and was not likely to start a war in response to negative words from the South. While being prudent, the South should be resolute in the face of North Korean rhetoric. Seoul and Washington now had the opportunity to bring our two approaches on North Korea closer together.

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COMMENT

¶19. (C) Combative and ideological, Lee Jong-seok has been the most visible face of President Roh's engagement policy. Although his departure is an acknowledgment that the policy he represented had failed, we have seen no evidence so far that President Roh is about to embark on a different course. Rather, the ROKG seems to be engaged in a holding action only, unwilling to do much except stress stability, which in practical terms means not doing anything that might provoke Pyongyang's ire. Lee now returns to the Sejong Institute, home to many engagement policy supporters, including Lim Dong-won, former President Kim Dae-jung's right-hand man in implementing the Sunshine Policy, and Baek Jong-chun, head of the Sejong Institute and the likely successor to Song Min-soon as National Security Advisor. END COMMENT.

VERSHBOW